

BARRIERS TO IMPROVEMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA'S LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), North Carolina must continue its efforts by the Department of Public Instruction to support its lowest performing schools. These schools are identified by a performance grade based on proficiency on achievement tests, test score growth, and graduation rates. However, these measures represent **symptoms** of low performance, **not the causes**.

LOW PERFORMANCE AMONG SCHOOLS STEMS FROM THE INHERENT INSTABILITIES THAT MAKE THEM VULNERABLE TO POOR PERFORMANCE.

- 1 **Inexperienced principals struggle** to establish school routines and processes that support academic success and **turn over at a much higher rate** in schools that become the lowest performing.
- 2 **Principal turnover leads to teacher turnover** and the much higher rates of teacher turnover in these schools leads to **filling vacancies with inexperienced teachers**, many of whom are alternative entry and long-term substitutes.
- 3 Teacher turnover, especially turnover that occurs during the school year, **disrupts learning and relationships with students**, and test scores plummet.
- 4 Students become less engaged and **student absenteeism, late arrivals, and early departures increase**.
- 5 Families served by these schools **move frequently** and often **experience homelessness** and other poverty-related challenges that lead to **missed class time**, which again destabilizes these schools and the learning processes.
- 6 **Severe weather** has magnified the instability in these schools.

IF LEFT UNADDRESSED, THESE INSTABILITIES WILL BECOME BARRIERS TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT.

The purpose of this research brief is to raise awareness of the instabilities that are endemic to North Carolina's lowest performing schools. We focus on 114 schools that were identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) by the Department of Public Instruction in October 2018. We analyze the schools' data for the five years leading up to the year they were identified as CSI. This brief builds on findings from school supports for the lowest performing schools in North Carolina from 2006 to 2018 and details the instabilities referred to in the policy brief on Guiding Principles.

INSTABILITIES IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Low-performing schools grapple with instabilities that occur among principals, teachers, and students. Left unaddressed, these instabilities become barriers to school improvement. This section illustrates some of these instabilities in CSI schools relative to other schools in North Carolina. In the CSI schools, these instabilities are much more intense and persistent over time, and in many cases are escalating in the years leading up to their identification as CSI schools.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Frequent principal and assistant principal turnover destabilizes the learning environment in low-performing schools. Principal transitions have a direct effect on student achievement as well as indirect effects through teachers, on school climate, and through unintentional disruption of ongoing school operations, programs, and reform efforts.

“We have a big administration turnover and that makes a big difference because they want to come in and change everything,” said one teacher in a low-performing high school. “Every two years, we’ve had a different principal. We haven’t had any consistency at all in the last 10 years.”

Principal turnover occurs more frequently in low-performing schools than higher performing schools and has been rising in CSI schools in the years before they were designated as CSI. In the five years from 2013-14 through 2017-18, turnover remained relatively flat in schools that would be designated with a school performance grade (SPG) of C or above in 2018. At the same time, principal turnover in lower performing schools was increasing. While about 25 percent of schools that would be included on the 2018 CSI list lost their principal in 2013-14, that number steadily rose as school performance declined, climbing to about 39 percent of CSI schools with at least one principal turnover in 2017-18 (Figure 1).

This trend shows that principal turnover and school performance are interrelated: schools that would ultimately drop into the low-performing list show warning signs in advance of their low-performing designation. **In fact, more than 90 percent of CSI schools lost at least one principal during the five-year period prior to their drop into the CSI category. About 23 percent of CSI schools experienced at least three principal turnovers during that five-year period.**

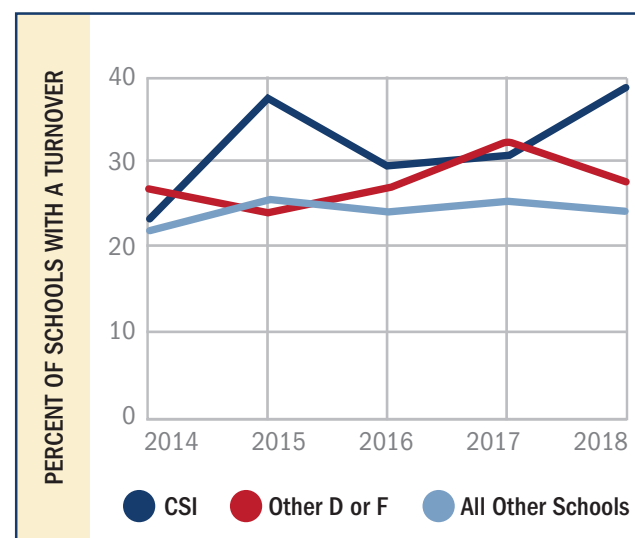
High rates of assistant principal turnover also hinder the consistency of ongoing operations at low-performing schools. More than one-fourth of the 2018 CSI schools that were open for all five years from 2013 through 2018 lost at least one assistant principal per year.

PRINCIPAL CHURN BY THE NUMBERS

23% of CSI schools had 3 or more principal turnovers in 5 years

92% of CSI schools had at least 2 principals in 5 years

FIGURE 1: Principal turnover was rising in CSI schools in the years leading up to their CSI designation.^{1,2}



“This is my third year teaching. This is my third different AP and I’ve liked each of them,” said one teacher in a low-performing elementary school. “It’s just hard to not have that consistency at an admin level just because everybody works in a different way.”

TEACHERS

Frequent teacher turnover leads to large numbers of novice teachers and pervasive use of long-term substitutes in the classroom while destabilizing relationships in the schools. Research in other states finds replacing less effective teachers with more effective teachers can be a valuable strategy for school improvement, but replacement teachers in North Carolina's lowest performing schools tend not to be more effective than those replaced. These teachers who move to more affluent, higher performing schools are replaced by novice teachers, perpetuating a cycle in which persistently high teacher turnover produces persistently high novice teacher rates and teachers become frustrated with lack of support, inadequate preparation, and challenging school culture.

About 40 percent of teachers in CSI schools turned over in 2017-18, compared with about 25 percent in schools with SPGs of C or above (Figure 2). About 17 percent of turnovers in CSI occurred during the school year, which research shows is even more detrimental to student learning—research in North Carolina found that students whose teachers leave during the school year lose about 18.5 percent of an average student's growth.

Principals and teachers cited low pay as one contributing factor to teacher turnover. At about \$3,900 per year in 2017-18, the average teacher pay supplement in CSI schools was similar to the average supplement in higher performing schools where the workload may be less.

“When you’re working at such a high level and the pay is not up to that level, then it’s easy to say, I think I’m going to do something else,” said one district leader.

These high rates of turnover result in high levels of new-to-school teachers, who then need to adapt to school norms. In 2017-18, CSI schools had nearly 3.5 new-to-school teachers for every 100 students, compared with 2 in other D or F schools and less than 1.5 in higher performing schools. That means about 7 in 10 students in CSI elementary schools would be assigned to a new-to-teacher, while almost all students in middle and high schools would have at least one new-to-school teacher per day.

FIGURE 2: CSI schools experience higher rates of teacher turnover than other schools in the state, and many of those turnovers occur during the school year.

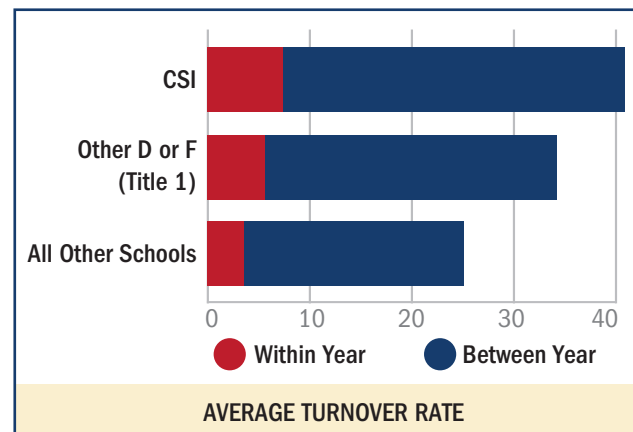
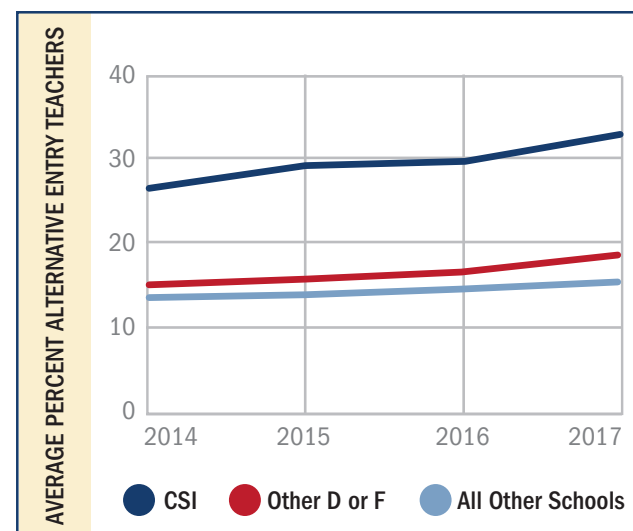


FIGURE 3: CSI schools rely more on alternative entry teachers and the use of these teachers increased in the years leading up to their CSI designation.⁴



In CSI schools, many replacements are alternative entry (Figure 3) and novice teachers. The use of alternative entry teachers was steadily increasing in the years leading up schools' CSI designations, while it remained constant in higher performing schools (Figure 3). Novice and alternative entry teachers require more support focused on pedagogy and classroom management and also turn over at higher rates than other teachers. Any positive effects of turnaround strategies focused on developing these teachers will exit the building if teachers move to another school or leave teaching altogether, thus emphasizing the importance of retaining teachers, especially more effective ones.

STUDENTS

In addition to experiencing instabilities occurring among school staff, students bring instabilities from home into the school building.

“A lot of the students that we serve, the environments they come from is unimaginable,” said a teacher in a low-performing middle school. “As kids come in, they have tests, you don’t know what they’ve dealt with when they left home that morning. You don’t know what they dealt with at night.”

These instabilities, associated with high levels of poverty, transfer policies, and other challenges associated with neighborhoods and family backgrounds, manifest in schools as missed class time and inadequate preparation among students transferring into low-performing schools.

Chronic student absenteeism, is increasing in all schools across the state and is substantially higher among CSI schools, **where about 1 in 3 students were chronically absent in the 2017-18 school year**—more than twice as many as students in other schools (Figure 4).

Students also transfer into low-performing schools outside of the typical feeder pattern at higher rates than in higher performing schools. They transfer after moving or other instability at home as well as because of disciplinary incidents at prior schools (Figure 5). CSI schools face especially high levels of these transfers because many CSI schools are alternative schools, but high in-transfer rates also plague traditional public CSI schools, where about one-third of students transfer in each year.⁷ These patterns are starkest in CSI high schools, where more than half of students transfer in and more than 45 percent of those students had an exclusionary discipline incident in their prior school. The low graduation rate CSI schools (all of which are high schools; CSI-LG) experience the highest rates of in-migration, with about half of their students coming into the school outside of the typical feeder pattern. Additionally, about 1 in 4 of students transferring in this way had at least one incident leading to exclusionary discipline in their prior school in the prior year.



FIGURE 4: Chronic student absenteeism has increased over time throughout the state, but is substantially higher in CSI schools than other schools.⁵

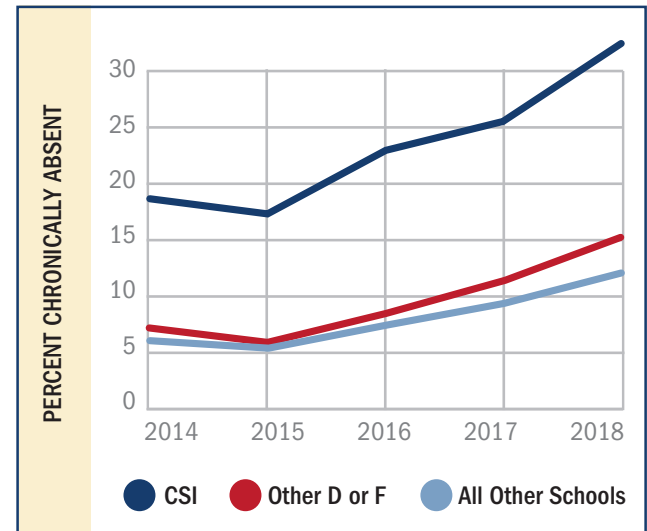
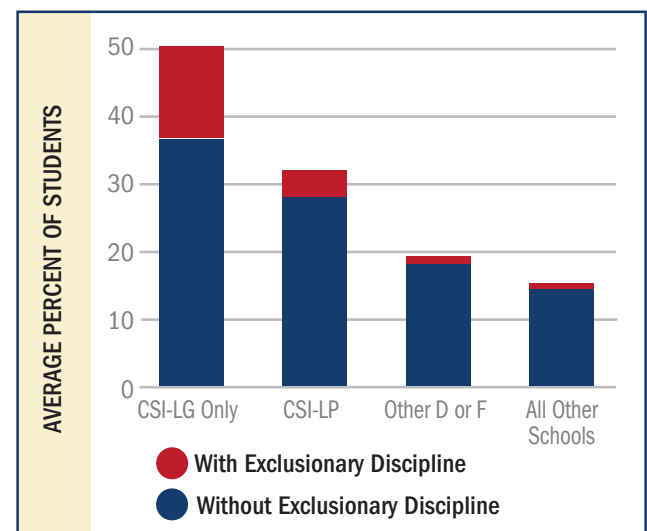


FIGURE 5: Almost half of students in CSI schools transfer in outside of the typical feeder pattern, and 1 in 5 of those transfers had prior exclusionary discipline.^{5, 6}



STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS INSTABILITIES IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The final section of this brief summarizes evidence-based practices to address some of the barriers with which CSI and other low-performing schools contend.



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Successful school turnaround efforts in Tennessee included financial incentives for effective principals and assistant principals to move to and remain in low-performing schools.⁸ Positive effects of school turnaround under Race to the Top in California and Ohio were largely driven by schools that implemented the federal turnaround model, which includes expanded autonomy for the replacement principal.^{9,10} Effective reform efforts in Tennessee and Ohio involved engaging an external partner (the University of Virginia School Turnaround Program) to improve principal capacity to lead change and implement effective school-level practices.¹¹



TEACHERS

Successful turnarounds in Tennessee and Massachusetts included financial incentives to recruit and retain highly effective teachers in low-performing schools.^{9,12} Other promising practices across the country and in North Carolina include using data to identify gaps in student learning, adopting a curriculum aligned with learning goals, and supporting teacher development through coaching that includes modeling and observations with feedback to teachers using an evidence-based instrument (e.g., Danielson Framework).



STUDENTS

While school turnaround research has not explicitly examined practices to address student-level barriers, the high school dropout prevention literature¹³ provides a basis for developing an early-warning system using student data to identify at-risk students before they drop out and address their individual needs related to transferring in, disciplinary infractions, and chronic absenteeism. Positive behavioral interventions (PBIS) have reduced disciplinary referrals and exclusionary discipline in some settings.¹⁴ Emerging research has suggested ways to reduce chronic student absenteeism include improving school-parent communication through texting interventions, partnering with community health centers, and focusing strategies on transition grades where absences are highest.¹⁵

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Includes only schools that were open for the full five-year period from 2013-14 through 2017-18.
- 2 Figures reflect percent of schools that experienced at least 1 principal transition.
- 3 Data from 2017-18 school year.
- 4 Teacher licensure data not yet available for 2017-18 school year.
- 5 Chronic absenteeism defined according to NC State Board of Education definition, where student must be enrolled for at least 10 school days with a total number of absences greater than or equal to 10% of enrolled days. 2017-18 absence data from state was higher in 2017-18 potentially because of difference in the way the state collected and reported absence data.
- 6 CSI-LG only schools are schools labeled as CSI because of graduation rates less than 66.7% but who are not in the bottom 5% on SPG scores. CSI-LP schools are all schools designated as CSI because they are in the bottom 5% on SPG scores.
- 7 Among traditional public schools in the CSI group, about 1 in 3 students transfer in outside of the typical feeder pattern and 12 percent of those transfers had prior exclusionary discipline.
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